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ABSTRACT

The oral proficiency interview, a one-to-one conversational interview structured to elicit the best performance the student can sustain, is based on a scale and test developed 30 years ago by the Foreign Service Institute. Interest in it has increased substantially in recent years, and further research and development of the measure for use in a variety of situations have been undertaken. It was found that, as a result of a training course given to test administrators, some teachers altered the curriculum, classroom activities, materials, and pace of instruction to help students cross the major thresholds between one proficiency level and the next. Several curriculum development projects have grown out of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/Educational Testing Service (ACTFL/ETS) oral proficiency projects, including one aimed at restructuring a secondary-level French program based on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and one creating a fourth-year college conversation course designed to move students from the intermediate to the advanced level. The ACTFL/ETS guidelines and tests based on them can serve as an organizing principle for curriculum development and provide a basis for the elaboration of end-of-course goals. They have been found to be more effective than other instructional strategies in helping students emerge from language study with a usable level of language skill. (MSE)

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Foreign Language Oral Proficiency Testing: An Organizing Principle for Instruction*

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Since 1981 the foreign language teaching profession has been actively engaged in exploring the ramifications of oral proficiency assessment--the testing of students' ability to use the spoken language in real-life settings--for methodology, curriculum, materials, and classroom testing. We are discovering that proficiency testing provides a valuable perspective on the instructional process that was absent before; we simply had no way of knowing, except anecdotally, how well students' classroom learning served them in real-life situations, such as travel abroad or employment. The oral proficiency interview can serve as a much-needed complement to teacher-made and standardized achievement tests. In addition, the rating scale used to assess student performance provides a basis for curriculum planning and the elaboration of end-of-course goals.

In this paper, I will give some background on the oral proficiency interview--what it is, where it came from, and how it operates--and then will describe the ways in which it is being used for student assessment, program assessment, and curriculum development.

THE ORAL PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW: AN INTRODUCTION

The oral proficiency interview is a structured one-on-one conversational interview that can last anywhere from five to 20 minutes. The resulting speech sample is then rated on a scale from Novice (some knowledge of words and phrases, but no practical ability to function in the language) to Superior (professional proficiency in the language). All of the ratings except Superior, i.e. Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced, have been subdivided to provide for greater discrimination. Even so, the ratings are properly thought of as ranges, rather than points on a scale, since the description of proficiency at each level and even sub-level is broad enough to include weaker and stronger performances over a significantly wide span.

The ratings reflect general oral ability, and the oral proficiency interview differs from most other foreign language tests in that it is not a discrete-point test of structure or vocabulary or fluency or pronunciation. All of these linguistic factors have been incorporated into the descriptions at each level. The ultimate criterion against which each speech sample is compared is the performance of an educated native speaker of the language. The characteristics of speakers at each level can be summarized as follows:

Novice: Limited to memorized material. No practical ability to communicate. Usually answers with isolated words or phrases.

Intermediate: Can survive for a day or two in a country in which the language is spoken in the way a tourist might. Creates with language. Can ask and answer questions on familiar topics and carry on short conversations. Can get into, through, and out of a simple survival or courtesy situation, such as getting a hotel room, making a purchase, or issuing an invitation to a friend. Must be intelligible to a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak the language.

Advanced: Able to participate fully in casual conversations. Can narrate and describe in past, present, and future time, joining sentences together in paragraph-length

discourse. Can talk about personal history, interests, activities, and plans. In addition, can report on or describe events in the external world. Can get into, through, and out of a survival situation with a complication. Intelligible to native speakers not used to dealing with foreigners.

Superior: Sufficient control of the language to converse in formal and informal contexts, resolve problem situations, deal with unfamiliar topics, explain and describe in detail, offer supported opinions, and hypothesize. Can talk about a wide range of practical, social, professional, and abstract topics, particular interests, and special fields of competence. Errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker.

The oral interview is structured so that it elicits from the student the very best performance that he or she is capable of sustaining. This is accomplished by a four-phase conversational interview that takes the student from very easy "warm-up" conversation to a conversation at the level the student can handle comfortably. This is the solid "linguistic floor" of sustained performance. The tester then raises the level of conversation one level higher to find the "linguistic ceiling," the point at which the student's language is not sufficient to respond to the linguistic demands suggested by the tester. The interview then ends with a gentle wind-down at a level that the student can handle comfortably so that he or she leaves the test with a feeling of accomplishment.

The structure of the interview and the ability of the trained tester to move skillfully between levels results in a revealing sample of oral ability. In a very short period of time the interviewer is able to see it all--the solid performance at a level the student can handle, and the breakdown in language when the tasks are too difficult.

History

The rating scale and the oral interview test were developed some 30 years ago by the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State. Although the descriptions of each level were originally designed for State Department purposes, they are general enough to apply to the evaluation of functional language ability in the academic context as well.

The academic community became interested in the potential use of the interview and scale for the assessment of students' and teachers' foreign language oral proficiency over a decade ago, largely through the use of the oral interview to certify the linguistic competence of Peace Corps volunteers to carry out the jobs to which they had been assigned. Until very recently, however, the use of the oral proficiency interview outside the government was quite limited.

The recent explosion of interest in proficiency assessment in "mainstream" academic institutions at the secondary and post-secondary level was sparked by the Report of President Carter's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1979). Among its recommendations was one that addressed directly the issue of language proficiency. The Commission recommended the establishment of "a National Criteria and Assessment Program" that would "establish language proficiency achievement goals for the end of each year of study, with special attention to speaking proficiency," and would, in addition, develop tests to "assess the proficiency of both students and teachers in existing as well as new or experimental foreign language programs."[1]

Although no such National Criteria and Assessment Program has been formally established, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the largest national association devoted to foreign language pedagogy, and Educational Testing Service (ETS) have assumed a leadership role in soliciting public and private funding to carry out the recommendations of the President's Commission. Since 1979, grants to ETS, ACTFL, and other institutions and agencies have resulted in the following major projects:

(1) The adaptation by ETS of the government rating scale to make it more usable for the assessment of traditional high school and college language learners. The principal modifications were the development of sub-ranges at the lower end of the scale and a new descriptive nomenclature in place of the government numerical levels.

(2) The development by ACTFL of proficiency scales in six languages for listening, speaking, reading, writing and culture, based on the modified scale developed by ETS. These have been written as a first step in the development of articulated end-of-course goals.

(3) The training of some 200 oral proficiency testers in eight languages, and of 20 of these as trainers of others.

(4) One major proficiency-based curriculum development institute for secondary school teachers, which has resulted in the creation of a number of innovative projects in curriculum, materials, and assessment.

(5) A model proficiency-based teacher certification testing program, developed in response to legislation in the state of Texas.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

When ETS and ACTFL began training testers early in 1982 to measure students' oral proficiency according to the newly developed ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, our sights were limited. We imagined that our workshop participants would use proficiency assessment for placement purposes, perhaps as a part of a proficiency-based language requirement and, looking to the future, possibly as a certification of students' oral skills as they left the university for the world of work. We frankly had not yet thought through the possible effects of proficiency testing on the curriculum. When these first workshop participants returned to their institutions after the 4½-day intensive training workshop, almost immediately the reports began coming in that things looked different to them in the classroom. Remarks like "I never knew before what they could do," and "We've been studying the present subjunctive for a month, but nobody can use it in a conversational setting," and "Now I understand why students can't discuss themes and concepts in my intro to lit course; they can read at the Superior level, but their ability to discuss is only at the Advanced level" were common. More important, the workshop participants began to devise ways to reorganize their courses so that the curriculum, the classroom activities, the materials, and the pace of instruction were all consciously arranged to help students cross the major thresholds between one proficiency level and the next.

It has long been recognized that tests are a driving force in instruction. If students are to take a particular type of standardized test at the end of a course or program of studies, teachers will understandably begin to "teach to the test," to modify their curricula so that students will learn what they need to know in order to perform well. When the test in question is unrelated to the goals and methods that the teacher believes in, then "teaching to the test" can be an educational disaster. If, on the other hand, students take proficiency

tests at the end of their sequence of language courses, tests that will assess how well they can handle the language in real-life situations, then the pressure on the teacher to "teach to the test' can be a positive force in courses oriented towards performance. Programs oriented toward real-life language use should also include the use of periodic proficiency tests, both to assess both student performance and to evaluate program effectiveness.

Of the instruction-related projects that have grown out of the ACTFL/ETS oral proficiency projects, I would like to describe two that illustrate the ways in which the proficiency scale and the oral proficiency interview are changing curricula in foreign language programs at the grass-roots level. The two projects are (1) the re-structuring of a French program at the secondary-school level, based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines; and (2) the creation of a fourth-year college conversation course designed to move students from the Intermediate level to the Advanced level.

The pioneering work of using the ACTFL Guidelines as an organizing principle for curriculum development began in the summer of 1983, when ACTFL held an NEH-sponsored three-week summer institute for secondary school teachers on this topic. In the first week, the participants were trained to conduct and rate oral proficiency interviews and became immersed in the speaking guidelines. They spent weeks 2 and 3 with their textbooks, their curriculum guides, and the ACTFL Guidelines, working in small groups to develop projects to revise the curriculum or make classroom activities more communicative.

These projects were tried out and refined during the fall semester and have been published by ACTFL as a case book. Most of the projects involved classroom activities, and were focused on moving students over a critical threshold on the proficiency scale. A second class of projects involved using the proficiency guidelines as starting points

for the development of curricula. In this regard, it is important to remember that the ACTFL Guidelines are not curriculum outlines, nor are they prescriptions for what grammatical structures to teach and when. They are a graduated sequence of proficiency stages around which a foreign language program may be structured. The "meat and potatoes" of that program, the day-to-day activities that constitute the sequence of small steps in the context of the larger phases identified by the guidelines, as well as the methods to be used, are still and always the province of the foreign language teacher.

Perhaps the most ambitious curriculum-development undertaking to emerge from the ACTFL summer institute is a new set of curriculum guidelines for the French program at Walpole (MA) High School, designed by teachers Floy Miller and Charlotte Cole (1983). In the introduction to the first version of the curriculum outlines for French I, French II, and French II Honors, Miller and Cole explain that they wished to escape from the futile exercise that curriculum writing so often represents: "... we did not wish to produce curriculums that had no value for the classroom or ones that had little use other than cosmetic for the shelves or files where such documents seem inevitably to rest in peace until the next revision."[2]

Miller and Cole began by examining the departmental goals for the language program as a whole, and interpreting them in light of the ACTFL Guidelines. They then devised end-of-year goals for speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture for all five course levels in French. The end-of-course goals are also expressed in terms of the Guidelines, following a sequence that will bring students who complete French V to a level of proficiency consonant with the overall program goals set by the department. The next step was to analyze the text used in each course to see how the material in each unit contributed to the students' attainment of the end-of-course proficiency goals. Each unit was outlined, and day-to-day communicative "implementation" activities

were designed to make the textbook serve more fully the goals of the course.

For illustration, the proposed French I curriculum guidelines are printed in the handout. The function statements are taken from the ACTFL Guidelines (note that students completing a first-year course are expected to be at the Novice Level in speaking, listening, and writing, and at the Intermediate Level in reading); the linguistic function statements are inspired by the Guidelines, but the details of content come from the topics and vocabulary covered in the textbook.

A perusal of the unit outlines for French I reveals that students are exposed to material beyond that which they are expected to master by the end of the course. For example, no ability in functional terms to handle the tenses other than the present is expected by the end of French I, yet the passe compose, imparfait, and futur are all introduced during the course. The instructional approach is cyclical; students are introduced to more advanced structures and practice manipulating them mechanically in structured drill activities; at a later stage, they will be exposed to readings containing these structures, and will be expected to use them in structured writing exercises, such as guided compositions. At an even later stage, they may be expected to use them easily and naturally in conversation and in writing. By this time their familiarity with the structures and their general level of proficiency will have increased, making it possible for them to do so. This long-term, cyclical approach to the building of proficiency is supported by leading methodologists.

Miller and Cole plan to use the oral proficiency interview primarily to evaluate their program, not to evaluate the proficiency of all students. The chief objection to the use of the oral interview in secondary schools is that it is impractical. No teacher has enough time to administer interviews to all of his or her students. Miller and Cole

plan to assess students' oral proficiency as a tool to monitor their curriculum development project in the following ways:

(1) interview a stratified sample of students at the beginning of French II and French II Honors to determine the proficiency levels of students who are beginning language study at the secondary level;
(2) administer the oral interview to transfer students as an aid in placement;
(3) interview all seniors and underclassmen who are terminating language study, in the hope eventually of recording the ratings on the students' transcripts; and
(4) interview a random sample of students who have completed a two-year sequence, in order to monitor progress and assess the effectiveness of the program.

The major innovation of Miller and Cole's work from a curriculum development standpoint is that their point of departure was the ACTFL Guidelines, an external set of performance goals that indicate directions for instruction. They then modified the textbook to suit their needs, creating their own materials as necessary to fill in the gaps. Most curriculum guidelines take as their point of departure the table of contents of the textbook, for two main reasons: (1) until the publication of the ACTFL Guidelines, there were no systematically articulated goals to allow for other than those implied by the sequence of topics and chapters in the publishers' text series; and (2) most teachers have not been able to devote the kind of time to the mammoth endeavor of restructuring a program that Miller and Cole have.

Case Study 2: Developing a New Curriculum for an Advanced Conversation at Northwestern University

The general principle that performance assessment can lead to more realistic instructional goals is illustrated in a project undertaken by Professor Isabelle Kaplan (1984) in a upper-division conversation course at Northwestern University. The course has traditionally been quite small--one section of approximately 15 students. Its clientele consists mainly of French majors and other students with a serious interest in developing oral facility in French who have not been able to study abroad.

After becoming acquainted with the proficiency scale and being trained as an oral proficiency tester, Kaplan realized that she had pitched the course at an unrealistically high level. Most such conversation courses, serving students who have had three full years of college French, assume that students can intelligently and articulately discuss controversial and relatively abstract topics, such as US intervention in the affairs of Third World nations, or the issues surrounding local or national elections. When Kaplan conducted oral proficiency interviews of her students at the beginning of the semester, she found that all of them were at some point of the Intermediate level--speakers able to carry out short, simple conversations on familiar topics, such as home, family, and school. Clearly, world affairs and the pros and cons of prayer in the schools were far beyond their ability.

The new conversation course that Kaplan developed was designed to move students from the Intermediate to the Advanced level, the level at which students can narrate and describe in past, present, and future time. She discovered in the process that the students did not know how to structure a narration or a description even in English. A large part of her planning, therefore, was devoted to activities that would develop

students' ability to tell a story with an informative beginning, an expanded middle, and a rounded-out conclusion. In the realm of description, students had to learn first to observe; Professor Kaplan developed a generic outline for all descriptions, listing for the students the elements of an object, place, or person that should be included.

The course was designed on functional grounds--training the students to narrate and describe first in the present, then in the past, and finally in the future. Unlike most language courses, which are organized around a series of grammatical topics that are covered one at a time in linear fashion, Kaplan's course introduced grammatical elements as they were needed to serve the functional goals. Students reviewed such grammatical topics as verb conjugations, noun-adjective agreement, and placement of pronouns as they were needed for the functional task at hand.

The results of the course were two-fold:

(1) Students' oral proficiency increased. When Kaplan tested the students at the end of the semester, she found that all of them were at the Advanced level. She credits the focused curriculum for the significant increase in proficiency; by knowing precisely where the students were, she was able to develop a course at the appropriate level.

(2) The second result of the experiment was that enrollment in the course tripled the next year. The students spread the word among their peers that "finally I learned how to speak French." They were correct; the Advanced level is a very solid, serviceable level of oral skill. Although Kaplan did not develop her course as part of a formal research project with treatment and control groups, this spontaneous enthusiastic reaction to the course on the part of the students is evidence that significant and unusually rapid learning had taken place.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, how can the ACTFL Guidelines and the proficiency tests based on them work together to affect curriculum? There are several ways.

First, and most important, projects like Miller and Cole's and Kaplan's utilize the Guidelines directly as the organizing principle to design a curriculum. Proficiency tests in both of these projects were used not to evaluate students' performance for purposes of assigning grades, but rather to generate data on students' level of proficiency as an aid in the curriculum development work.

Second, tests in and of themselves drive instruction. Any kind of oral test will have the positive backwash effect of making students take oral production more seriously.

Third, foreign language courses organized around functional goals are more effective. Students' efforts to learn a particular structure will not be wasted if the material is introduced at a point and in such a way that students are able to incorporate it into their growing base of knowledge about and skill in the language.

The most basic, and perhaps most important goal that is inspiring the effort to promote proficiency-based foreign language education is that students emerge from language study with a usable level of language skill. The minimum level of skill that can be characterized as "usable" in this context is that needed to read a simple paragraph, ask and answer questions, and get from point A to point B in a country in which the language is spoken. Students who achieve this level of basic proficiency may well be motivated to learn more. Our hope is that by the time the next generation or two of students come to adulthood, foreign language teachers will never again hear remarks at cocktail parties like "Oh, you're a foreign language teacher? I took four years of French in high school and I can't say a thing."

References

[1]Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability. A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979).

[2]Miller, Floy, and Charlotte Cole. Curriculum Project NEH Institute, Haverford (PA) College. Summer 1983. (Unpublished mimeo).

[3]Kaplan, Isabelle. Foreign Language Annals (forthcoming)

CURRICULUM GUIDELINES, LEVEL I

	Function	Content
SPEAKING	Able to express basic courtesy formulae. Able to make short statements. Able to enumerate in short phrases.	Immediate needs such as greetings, basic objects, days, months, colors, weather, etc.
LISTENING	Able to comprehend basic courtesy formulae. Able to comprehend basic vocabulary and memorized material. Able to comprehend utterances in highly contextualized situations.	Immediate needs such as greetings, basic objects, months, days, colors, weather, etc. Immediate needs such as in a restaurant, store, train, bus, etc.
READING	Able to read basic vocabulary and short phrases. Able to read instructional and directional material. Able to read mastered material or recombinations of mastered material.	Immediate needs such as names, addresses, signs indicating names of streets and avenues, building names and short information signs. Immediate needs such as items on menus, schedules, timetables, maps and social codes (Défense de fumer, etc.). Basic survival needs such as messages, greetings and social amenities in dialogue and specially prepared texts.
WRITING	Able to copy isolated words and short phrases. Able to transcribe memorized words and phrases. Able to write memorized words, lists and phrases.	Immediate needs such as name, address, dates, numbers, days, months and common objects. Courtesy formulae such as expressions in greetings and leave-takings.

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